



Culture Wars and International Intervention: An ‘Inside/Out’ View of the Decline of National Interest

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Today there is a consensus that the foreign policy of leading Western powers cannot be understood by considering nation states as egoistic actors pursuing narrow self-interest. Since the end of the Cold War, major states have increasingly stressed the importance of ethics and values in the shaping of international goals and have intervened internationally on the basis of ‘other-regarding’ concerns such as human rights and international justice. Many commentators have understood this shift to ‘value-led’ or ‘ethical’ foreign policy through an ‘outside/in’ approach to the question, viewing this value shift as a response to international pressures of globalization and the creation of new cosmopolitan constituencies. This article instead employs an ‘inside/out’ approach, which suggests that the shift away from the articulation of national interests and the drive to defend ‘values’ through international intervention can be understood as products of and responses to the domestic political malaise at the heart of Western politics, often referred to in the US as an outcome of the ‘Culture Wars’.

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Introduction

Today the key actor in international relations, the nation state, appears to have lost the capacity or will to pursue its self-interest defined in terms of power. Commentators from a variety of theoretical perspectives argue that the most developed nation states increasingly see themselves as having moral obligations to international society (Brown, 2001, 24–26).¹ The key theoretical framework for understanding the international sphere, that of state interest, not only central to realism but also to the rational choice perspective of neoliberal frameworks of international cooperation, appears to have lost its explanatory power. Rather than states and national interests shaping the direction of policy, it appears that there is a new agenda set by non-state actors, whether it is the normative values and transnational concerns of the ‘principled-issue’



campaigners of global civil society or the threats to security from terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda.

The Constructivist approach rejects the 'outside/in' approach of understanding national interests as structured through the logic of anarchy, suggesting that national interests and identities are contingent and socially constructed (see for example, Wendt, 1992). Nevertheless, these interests are still constructed in the international sphere itself, even if states do have the potential to make and to act on alternative identity 'choices' (Wendt, 1992, 419). While the domestic political framework and institutional structures play an important role, it is generally held to be a secondary one. It is transnationally operating non-state actors, which are the active agents of change, diffusing 'principled ideas' and 'international norms' related to human rights and transnational justice (Risse and Sikkink, 1999). It is in response to this changed international context that states are generally understood to have been driven to reshape or redefine their identities. The largely instrumental use of 'principled ideas' during the Cold War is held to have given way to the institutionalization of new practices in the international sphere, sustained by the pressure of transnational human rights networks 'from above' and supported by civil society pressure 'from below' (Risse and Sikkink, 1999, 34).

Liberal internationalists argue that power is not exercised in the old way. Influential US liberal theorist Joseph Nye, for example, argues that the traditional distinction 'between a foreign policy based on values and a foreign policy based on interests' should be rejected (Nye, 2002, 138). Nye writes that the challenges of the 'global information age' have required the redefinition of national interest (Nye, 2002, 136). *The Responsibility to Protect* report, from the high-level International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001b, 129), asserts the consensus view that nation states are not forced 'by systemic or structural factors' to pursue narrow interests, but are free to make moral choices (International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001a). It appears that critical theorists like Andrew Linklater and Ken Booth have successfully pre-empted developments in international relations theorizing with their focus on a 'bolder moral standpoint' and desire to move away 'from accumulating knowledge about 'relations between states' (what might be called the 'dismal science' of Cold War international relations) to thinking about ethics on a global scale' (Booth, 1995, 109–110).

This view of the end of national interests has attained a broad consensus from radical postmodernists and left-leaning academics to senior British diplomats. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, argue that Vietnam was the last attempt the US made to play an imperial role, pursuing its national interests 'with all the violence, brutality and barbarity befitting any European imperialist power' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 178). However, the defeat in Vietnam marked a passage to a new regime of genuine



internationalism. For these radical critics, the 1991 Gulf War illustrated that the US had now become 'the only power able to manage international justice, *not as a function of its own national motives but in the name of global right*' (emphasis in original). Sussex professor, Martin Shaw, argues that rather than the imperialism of national interest, the projection of Western power since the Cold War has been 'post-imperial', a moral response to crises provoked by non-Western powers, which still seek to pursue territorial claims and the narrow interests of power (Shaw, 2002).

Leading European Union and British government policy-advisor Robert Cooper argues that leading Western powers are 'postmodern' imperialists, no longer asserting any national interests of their own:

A large number of the most powerful states no longer want to fight or conquer. It is this that gives rise to both the pre-modern and postmodern worlds. Imperialism in the traditional sense is dead, at least among the Western powers. (Cooper, 2002, 14)

Cooper writes that we now live in a 'postmodern world, *raison d'état* and the amorality of Machiavelli's theories of statecraft, which defined international relations in the modern era, have been replaced by a moral consciousness' (Cooper, 2002, 13). If there is a 'national' interest that is seen as respectable today it is the 'national interest in being, and being seen to be, a good international citizen... regularly willing to pitch into international tasks for motives that appear to be relatively selfless' (International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001a, 72).

The Radical Response

In the face of the current consensus that national interests do not operate in the old way to shape international policy-making, one response has been to defend a traditional 'realist' or rationalist approach. However, today it would appear that the few defenders of national interests or narrow rational instrumentality as a guide to understanding the international sphere are marginal critics from the Left. Alex Callinicos, for example, argues that the US is still an imperialist power pursuing national interests and that international cooperation stems from the need to contain and structure the conflict and competition inherent in international capital (Callinicos, 2002). Peter Gowan similarly asserts that behind the drive for economic globalization lies traditional US imperialism (Gowan, 1999). The 'realist' view of timeless competition for power appeals to commentators who wish to argue that the ending of the Cold War has made little difference to the operation of capitalism and the power inequalities implicit in the world market.



For many critics on the Left the talk of postmodern imperialism, human rights and cosmopolitan justice is merely the latest in a long line of moral justifications for national interests. For Noam Chomsky:

“the new interventionism” is replaying an old record. It is an updated variant of traditional practices that were impeded in a bipolar world system that allowed some space for nonalignment... With the Soviet deterrent in decline, the Cold War victors are more free to exercise their will under the cloak of good intentions but in pursuit of interests that have a very familiar ring outside the realm of enlightenment. (Chomsky, 1999, 11)

In the post-1945 retreat from Empire, non-Western states won the formal rights of political and legal equality and the new ‘constitution’ for international society, the UN Charter, which guaranteed the collective rights of sovereignty and self-government against intervention from major powers. In this context, it is undoubtedly true that ethical internationalism has legitimized the rewriting of the rules of the international order, facilitating a return to Great Power intervention and the overturning of the political gains of the post-colonial period (see, Chandler, 2000). However, the collapse of the Cold War balance of power and shift to a unipolar world under US domination would suggest that the protections of the UN framework of 1945 would no longer have withstood the post-1989 realignment of power, regardless of how this was legitimized after the event (Bull, 1977/1995; Holbrook, 2002).²

Rather than simply assert the existence of power–political competition, it would seem more challenging to ask a question rarely posed by the critics of ‘humanitarian’ wars and ‘postmodern imperialism’ — ‘Why is it that national interests appear to have been so roundly rejected?’ Even in the ‘war against terrorism’ the US has continually asserted that it was not acting out of national concerns. For example, the invasion of Afghanistan was promoted as an act of concern for the people of the region. When President George W. Bush announced the start of the bombing campaign on 7 October 2001 he presented it as one in aid of the ‘oppressed people of Afghanistan’ rather than an entirely legitimate action of self-defence in response to an attack on American national symbols of economic and military power. Rather than emphasizing national interests, Bush stressed America’s humanitarian aims:

As we strike military targets, we’ll also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan. The United States of America is a friend to the Afghan people, and we are the friends of almost a billion worldwide who practice the Islamic faith. (Bush, 2001b)

Even the avowedly hawkish National Security Strategy, issued in September 2002, seems remarkably ‘soft’ in its humanitarian emphasis on nation-building



with the assistance of NGOs. On the one hand the US writes a blank cheque for the exercise of power in its declaration of a unilateral right to strike preemptively before threats materialize, yet on the other it pledges to 'continue to work with international organizations such as the United Nations, as well as non-governmental organizations, and other countries to provide the humanitarian, political, economic, and security assistance necessary to rebuild Afghanistan'.³

The critics take the national interests behind foreign adventures as a given. This paper suggests that there is more to the postmodern rejection of national interests than PR spin. That, in fact, critics from the Left ignore a central facet of the post-Cold War world — the problem that Western powers have in articulating a national interest. Rather than military interventions abroad being driven by traditional national interests of power competition, it would appear that they are motivated by the inability of leading Western states to cohere a vision of their national interests. This study contends that the projection of power abroad is more a response to the difficulties of negotiating national goals and aims, than a straightforward projection of these pre-given interests.

Culture Wars

The majority of commentators adopting a liberal or constructivist framework today tend to reproduce the 'outside/in' approach of structural realism in attributing the shift away from national interests to changes in the international sphere. In place of the external structure of anarchy imposing a uniformity of decision-making, it is asserted that the external development of 'principled-issue' constituencies and a globalized cosmopolitan consciousness compels nation states to adapt to a new international environment. Rather than deriving new national 'identities' or interests from international pressures, this article emphasizes the possibility that international interventions can be driven by a domestic process of constituting and defining national interests. There has been a long tradition of thought, since Kant's essay on *Perpetual Peace*, which considers the impact of domestic political institutions and national identity in shaping the projection of power internationally (Doyle, 1986; Müller and Risse-Kappen, 1992). However, less has been written about the use of international activism abroad in the attempt to forge a national identity at home. Let us consider the two most interventionist powers, Britain and the US.

At the domestic level it appears that political power can no longer be exercised in the traditional way. Governments are increasingly seen to be less important or influential. There is increasing cynicism and doubt over government and politics, demonstrated by falling turn-outs at the polls,



declining party memberships and lower viewing figures for the nightly news. Even General Election victories, the defining point of the domestic political process, no longer bring governments a sense of authority or legitimacy. This was clear in the contested victory of George W. Bush in the 2000 elections, which turned on the problem of the 'hanging' chad in Florida. However, the problem of deriving legitimacy from elections is a much broader one, not directly connected to concerns of manipulation or even to voter apathy. In the British elections in 2001, Tony Blair achieved a land-slide second-term mandate, the government has little political opposition to speak of either in the British parliament or in the country at large, yet there is no sense of a connection to the general public or of a political project that can engage society.

No matter the size of the parliamentary majority, without a political project, which can give meaning to government actions and the passing of legislation, governments appear weak and ineffectual. Domestic policy decisions, whether in education, health, transport or policing, appear to be short-term or knee-jerk responses bereft of any long-term aims. Without an ideological context, policy is liable to be reversed or undermined at the first sign of funding difficulties or problems in implementation. Rather than 'modern' politics where the state had a political programme or project which promised to transcend the present, to take society forward, today governments are caught in a 'postmodern' malaise. There appears to be no vision or project which can give government a sense of mission or purpose. In this context, domestic policy-making is caught in the 'everlasting present' where legislation is passed to deal with crisis-management and policy-making is contingent on events rather than shaped by government.

Without a sense of purpose or mission, governments lack coherence and credibility. In this context, foreign policy can be a powerful mechanism for generating a sense of political purpose and mission (Chandler, 2003). While the end of the Cold War has highlighted the domestic political malaise which makes government coherence and political vision difficult, it is important to note that the problems are rooted in a lack of confidence of the Western political elite which has deeper historical roots. Hardt and Negri, for example, note that Vietnam marked the 'point of passage' away from the confident pursuit of US national interests (Hardt and Negri, 2000, 178). After Vietnam, US power could no longer be projected with moral certainty. The American establishment no longer had a belief in their 'manifest destiny'.

However, the 'postmodern' state was born not in military humiliation in the Far East but in the disintegration of the moral certainty of US national interest at home. The lack of consensus over Vietnam reflected the lack of collective identification with US 'national' interests. Of the 2 million young men called up for the military draft an unprecedented 139,000 refused to serve. As



Christopher Coker astutely notes, it was not the failure of intervention in Vietnam in itself that made the assertion of US national interests problematic, but the domestic response to the war. Reflecting broader social trends of individualization or, in Ulrich Beck's terms 'reflexive modernization', the decay of traditional social bonds and values meant that the nation-state could no longer be seen as an end in itself (Coker, 2001, 154–155).

The 'postmodern' shift was a product of a lack of confidence in the innate superiority of the American way of life. The US establishment's defeat in the 'Culture Wars' of the late 1960s and 1970s corroded the old certainties about truth, justice and the American way. Everything about the past was called into question as American history was increasingly seen as tainted by racism and colonialism. Since Vietnam, dissent became respectable and there could no longer be a 'grand narrative' about US identity or 'national interest'. The Cold War framework served to minimize the postmodern domestic 'crisis of meaning', the lack of confidence of the American establishment in any great project. The end of moral certainty in the justness of the projection of US power meant that American intervention abroad could no longer find legitimacy in a 'vision of the future', instead it was 'reduced to managing the present' (Coker, 2001, 157). Rather than acting in national interests, the US rejected any positive project for the claim to be a subject-less world policeman.

The end of the Cold War and the removal of restrictions on an increasingly activist foreign policy created the possibility for the US establishment to use the international sphere to reverse the defeats of the Culture Wars, to lay to rest the 'Vietnam Syndrome'. The attempt to regain a sense of mission was strengthened by the restored sense of national pride in the aftermath of 'victory' in the Cold War. This restoration of American mission was initially articulated in the moral language of human rights and humanitarian intervention. The language of Wilsonian internationalism appeared to restore a sense of America's historic mission. Ethical concerns, such as the human rights of others, seemed to provide a moral framework which could project a sphere of agreement and consensus and point beyond the cultural relativism and pessimism of 'postmodern' times. As Francesca Klug notes: 'the post-Cold War search for new ideals and common bonds in an era of failed ideologies appears to have contributed to a growing appreciation of human rights as a set of values' (Klug, 2000, 147). Joseph Nye devotes a major section of his recent book, *The Paradox of American Power*, to 'The Home Front' and argues that while the impact of the Culture Wars has not been so great as to 'inhibit our capacity to act collectively' there is, nevertheless, a problem of articulating a common interest:

The problem of the home front is less the feared prospects of social and political decay or economic stagnation than developing and popularising a



vision of how the United States should define its national interest in a global information age. (Nye, 2002, 136)

It would seem that rather than a response to international pressures and civil society mobilization, this demand for a new 'national interest' or 'national ideals' has been generated by governing elites. In Britain, 'ethical' foreign policy was consciously seen as a key element in New Labour initiatives aimed at 'rebranding' Britain, creating a modern multi-cultural British identity (Brown, 2001, 16). Opinion studies have consistently demonstrated that the idea that there is public pressure for a policy shift towards more 'ethical' concerns has been exaggerated. For example, in the mid-1990s, polls showed that only a minority of the American public backed human rights promotion as an important foreign policy goal, well behind stopping the flow of illegal drugs, protecting the jobs of American workers and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons (Forsythe, 2000, 143; Holsti, 2000).⁴ This finding was illustrated by the fact that President Clinton had to explain where Kosovo was on the map, before attempting to promote military action in 1999, because there was so little public interest in the issue.

Perhaps the most important example of the British and US governments attempting to create an 'ethical' interventionist agenda is the case of Iraq. For the last ten years, US and British political leaders have used Iraq as an international cause which they can use to raise their status at home and emphasise their commitment to a moral mission abroad. The British and UK public have never been as enthusiastic as their governments in pursuing conflict with Saddam Hussein and the emphasis on Iraq in foreign policy initiatives has little to do with international lobbying or shifts in public opinion. For example, in July 2002 when George W. Bush and Tony Blair prepared the public for a possible military conquest of Iraq, polls showed that only a small, and declining, majority of American people were in favour (Tyson, 2002). Opinion polls consistently demonstrate that the Western public tends to share a narrow view of foreign policy priorities, based on perceptions of personal interests, rather than the more ideological 'crusading' perspective often pushed by their government leaders (Schwarz, 2000).

The attention to the articulation of a political mission, beyond the directionless of domestic politics, through foreign policy activism abroad has been an important resource of authority and credibility for British and US political leaders. The ability to project or symbolize unifying 'values' has become a core leadership attribute. George W. Bush's shaky start to the US presidency was transformed by his speech to Congress in the wake of the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks, in which he staked out his claim to represent and protect America's ethical values against the terrorist 'heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century' (Bush, 2001a). Tony Blair,



similarly, was at his most presidential in the wake of the attacks, arguing that values were what distinguished the two sides of the coming conflict: 'We are democratic. They are not. We have respect for human life. They do not. We hold essentially liberal values. They do not' (Blair, 2001a).

The search for ethical or principled approaches emphasizing the government's moral authority has inexorably led to a domestic shift in priorities making international policy-making increasingly high profile in relation to other policy areas. The emphasis on ethical foreign policy commitments enables Western governments to declare an unequivocal moral stance, which helps to mitigate awkward questions of government mission and political coherence in the domestic sphere. The contrast between the moral certainty possible in selected areas of foreign policy and the uncertainties of domestic policy-making was unintentionally highlighted when President George Bush congratulated Tony Blair on his willingness to take a stand over Afghanistan and Iraq: 'The thing I admire about this Prime Minister is that he doesn't need a poll or a focus group to convince him of the difference between right and wrong.'⁵ Tony Blair, like Bush himself, of course relies heavily on polls and focus groups for every domestic initiative. It is only in the sphere of foreign policy that it appears that there are opportunities for Western leaders to project a self-image of purpose, mission and political clarity.

Humanitarian Intervention

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the United States was the unchallenged world power with the preponderance of military might. Yet despite having unrivalled power, the US lacked an ideological framework to exercise its superiority. There was no grand project, no vision or policy framework to give the exercise of power meaning. It was in the context of this policy vacuum that the new doctrine of humanitarian intervention attempted to provide a new rationale, a new legitimacy to the exercise of US power.

In the international arena, the new ideological framework initially promised success. The US was able to rewrite the laws of international relations opening up a new sphere for international policy activism. At the end of the Gulf War, UN Security Council resolution 688 on 5 April 1991 ruled that domestic policies towards the Iraqi civilian population were a threat to 'international peace and security' and therefore subject to legitimate international intervention.⁶ The interventions of the early 1990s in Iraq, Somalia and Bosnia extended the rights of major powers to project their authority and rolled back the gains of the UN Charter period. Driven by America's unchallenged power, the old Cold War framework of equal sovereignty and nonintervention was steadily undermined (International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001a, 54). However, the US was not able to shape a new national



mission through humanitarian intervention for two reasons: firstly, it failed to secure long-term international legitimacy and secondly, it provided no broader positive vision of meaning that could give a sense of purpose to domestic politics. Rather than helping to overcome the Vietnam syndrome, attempts to project US power in the 1990s merely confirmed the corrosion of US confidence.

International Legitimacy

The concept of humanitarian intervention could not win long-term international legitimacy because it failed to convince the majority of the world's governments, who feared that their sovereignty was threatened, and provoked resistance from European allies concerned that their international standing would be undermined by US unilateralism. The view that human rights could 'trump' sovereignty was resisted by the majority of non-Western states, concerned about their own sovereign rights (Roth, 1999). The war over Kosovo revealed that the UN Security Council was split, with Russia and China resisting, but more telling was the fact that the US and Britain were reluctant to take the issue to the UN General Assembly for fear that the necessary majority, under the 'Uniting for Peace' procedure, would not be forthcoming (United Kingdom House of Common Foreign Affairs Committee, 2000).

While the US could build 'coalitions of the willing' in support of a particular intervention, the principle of humanitarian intervention itself could not win wider acceptance. There was no international consensus on any new international framework or amendment to the UN Charter restrictions on the use of force because both Western and non-Western states recognized that the blurring of domestic and international responsibilities could be fundamentally destabilizing (see further, Clapham, 1999; Chandler, 2002). The problems with winning any broader legitimacy were drawn out in the International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty report, *The Responsibility to Protect*. The Commission explicitly recognized that it was unlikely for any collective international institution to sanction the use of force on humanitarian grounds without a consensus of support in the UN Security Council:

An inhibiting consideration always is the fear that the tiger of intervention, once let loose, may turn on the rider: today's intervener could become the object of tomorrow's intervention. The numerical majority of any collective organisation, almost by definition, will be the smaller, less powerful states, suspicious of the motives of the most powerful in their midst, and reluctant to sanction interference by the powerful against fellow-weaklings.

A more fundamental problem was that the US could not tie in other Western states around this agenda in the long term. Humanitarian intervention was no



substitute for the Cold War's political and ideological defence of Western security. The US's major European allies, the UK, Germany and France, have shown themselves to be increasingly reluctant to see the US sideline the UN Security Council and undermine the cooperative institutions that they have used to enhance their standing internationally.

The framework of humanitarian intervention openly threatened to sideline the United Nations as the authorizing authority for military intervention, and through granting increased authority to *ad hoc* 'coalitions of the willing', making the Security Council subordinate to US power (Chandler, 2001).⁷ The European powers concerned to tie the US into multilateral institutions which preserved their positions of importance could be seen in resistance to the US opt out from the International Criminal Court (ICC). The trans-Atlantic rows over the ICC were not based on the possibility of US services coming before the new court, the Europeans had already offered assurances that this would not be the case, but on the principle that American 'exceptionalism' could not be openly legitimized.⁸

The Vision Thing

The problem with humanitarian intervention was that while the doctrine could serve to facilitate the exercise of US power and to overcome the formal barriers posed by the existing framework of international politics and international law, it was unable to create any positive framework of legitimization. Rather than resolving the domestic political malaise, foreign activism tended to export the problem to the international sphere. Coker argues that the reason for this is that the doctrine of humanitarianism offers no positive view of the future — there is no mission or political project that transcends the present. Humanitarian intervention is a doctrine of crisis management, which lacking any historical perspective becomes a slave of contingency, based on responding to emergency: 'And emergency does not constitute the first stage of a project of meaning: it represents its active negation' (Coker, 2001, 157).

The doctrine of humanitarian intervention enabled the US to project its power internationally, but did not operate as a source of meaning. The prevention of conflict and the protection of victims of human rights abuses became an end in itself rather than part of a broader political or ideological project. David Rieff highlights the problem with taking the ideological vision out of international intervention and the projection of power:

I think you can have just wars that don't have a humanitarian basis. One of the ways the conception of humanitarianism is being bent completely out of shape, losing its specific gravity to use another image, is that suddenly we talk about everything in humanitarian terms. My friend Ronnie Brauman at



MSF France says if Auschwitz happened today they would call it a humanitarian emergency. We can have a just war without there being a humanitarian emergency. Indeed the opposite is true. In this sense the Left is surely correct. Wars tend to exacerbate humanitarian crises not improve them, that's the nature of war. So already it's a fantasy. (Rieff, 2002)

The project of exercising power abroad through 'humanitarian intervention' was shot through with contradictions. As Rieff suggests, the project of 'ethical' foreign policy was a fallacy; it was impossible to develop a coherent political strategy based purely on prevention. No matter how many countries were intervened against, there could be no victory or lasting success. The logic of a consistent ethical foreign policy would be an untenable 'war without end' and the breakdown of the mechanisms holding together international society. The ideal of preventing human rights abuse or conflict, like preventing domestic crime, cannot be achieved by policing and punishment. To cite Coker:

Victory is no longer an objective. Postmodern societies do not fight wars to secure a final peace; they use war to manage insecurity... Wars are no longer wars, they are police actions. For there is no 'peace', no world order, no imperial mission, only the endless prospect, to quote President Clinton, of 'a world in which the future will be threatened'. (Coker, 2001, 163)

Rather than projecting power in a way which could reinstate a national vision, the predominant image of humanitarian intervention was one of weakness. The defining motifs are not ones of US strength and power — most manifest in the bombing of a major European capital, Belgrade — but rather weakness in failing to intervene in Rwanda and failing to act decisively in Bosnia until it was too late. The humanitarian framework made the aggressive assertion of US power appear contentless, without meaning and long-term justification. Even Kosovo, the leading example of intervention for moral values, is seen as a failure, merely encouraging, or being powerless to stop, the 'reverse' ethnic cleansing of the Serb minority. The problems of the Balkans appeared to remain the same, all that had changed was the pecking order.

The most ardent advocates of humanitarian intervention, as symbolic of a new sense of Western political identity and moral vision, were caught in a bind. On the one hand they insisted that governments should be willing to sacrifice their own troops for a 'just' cause, on the other hand, they had no political framework to justify such a sacrifice. It was as if just acting in a morally committed manner could become a replacement for a grand mission. The key issue was the demonstration of social commitment and engagement rather than the exercise of power in itself. Going to war was no longer enough to restore a



sense of moral mission, the public had to be galvanized too. In Britain strident interventionists like Mary Kaldor argued that military action was not enough to give a sense of meaning to humanitarian intervention. Rather than just focus on bombs, the government needed to work on the 'home front' to convince the public on the question 'whether it is acceptable to sacrifice national lives for the sake of people far away' (Kaldor, 1999, 130). David Rieff emphasized the need for the US government to involve the public in 'a truly democratic debate' about the 'kind of world the United States wants... and what it is willing to sacrifice... to achieve its goals' (Rieff, 1999).

Rieff and others bemoaned 'the indifference with which the American and Western European public lethargically assented to the Kosovo war, always providing, that is, that there were no casualties on our side' (Rieff, 2000). Perhaps the most trenchant criticism of the US government's failure to use humanitarian intervention to forge a new national vision came from Michael Ignatieff. The title to his book on Kosovo, *Virtual Wars*, highlights the problem (Ignatieff, 2000). Unlike wars of the past, Ignatieff argues Kosovo failed to mobilize or cohere society and offer people 'a moment of ecstatic moral communion with fellow citizens' (Ignatieff, 2000, 186). The public were alienated and uninvolved:

[Citizens of NATO countries] were mobilised, not as combatants but as spectators. The war was a spectacle: it aroused emotions in the intense but shallow way that sports do. The events were as remote from their essential concerns as a football game... commitment is intense but also shallow. (Ignatieff, 2000, 3–4)

While the pro-war advocates wanted the moral mission abroad to have an impact at home, their moralization of conflict illustrated just how deep the problems were. Even though there was little domestic opposition to the principle of military intervention, the impact of the Culture Wars weighed heavily in the domestic focus on military strategy, on the methods and practices of the intervening forces. A moral debate that started with the 'human wrongs' committed by the Milošević government was soon transformed into a critique of NATO strategy, the accidental or 'collateral' killing of civilians and the reluctance of the US government to commit ground troops, which it was held may have minimized the deaths of non-combatants.

The argument that US and British lives could not be treated as if they were more valuable than those of Bosnian, Albanian or Rwandan people demonstrated the difficulty of exorcizing the ghost of Vietnam — of asserting a new national interest or identity through the humanitarian framework. Rather than winning wars, the moral mission of humanitarian intervention was self-defeating in its inevitable questioning of any strident use of power. As the International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty noted,



traditional warfighting was no longer possible as ‘democratic societies that are sensitive to human rights and the rule of law will not long tolerate the pervasive use of overwhelming military power’ (International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001a, 62; Vaux, 2001, 202). While the cause was popular, governments themselves achieved little moral authority. It was the humanitarian NGOs who gained legitimacy from the militarization of humanitarianism rather than the military. The British Army could gain little credibility as the ‘military wing of Oxfam’ when military means were now seen as ethically suspect (Norton-Taylor, 2000). After Kosovo, the concept of fighting war for humanitarian reasons was increasingly treated with scepticism by both governments and humanitarian organizations (Vaux, 2001).⁹ Rather than addressing the domestic malaise, through providing a framework for the coherent projection of power, the doctrine of humanitarian intervention proved only to have intensified it.

The War against Terrorism

It appeared as if the horrific events of 9/11 would rewrite the norms and practices of international society and provide the ‘defining paradigm’ missing from ‘the global order’ since the end of the Cold War (see for example, Booth and Dunne, 2002, ix). The doctrine of humanitarian intervention had exposed the US to accusations of double standards and given the moral highground to aid agencies rather than military forces. In the wake of 9/11, the US government had the opportunity to regain the moral mantle. In a world of victim politics, the US could at last claim to be a victim itself. In the words of Martin Shaw, the US and Britain now had the ‘moral capital’ they needed to overcome the legacy of Empire and tackle the Culture Wars at home and abroad (Shaw, 2001).

Initially, Bush and Blair were upbeat about the possibilities for developing a new vision of the future. For the hawks in the US establishment, 9/11 provided the legitimacy to project US power in a more confident way and long-term plans for war on Iraq were already considered on that day (Goldenberg and Borger, 2003). US Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, recognized from the beginning that the ‘war against terrorism’ was an opportunity to restore what America had lost in Vietnam. As Maureen Dowd noted in the *New York Times*:

The administration isn’t targeting Iraq because of 9/11. It’s exploiting 9/11 to target Iraq. This new fight isn’t logical — it’s cultural. It is the latest chapter in the culture wars, the conservative dream of restoring America’s sense of Manifest Destiny... Extirpating Saddam is about proving how tough we are to a world that thinks we got soft when that last helicopter left the roof of the American embassy in Saigon in 1975. (Dowd, 2002)



This confidence was most manifest in Tony Blair's triumphant speech to the Labour Party conference in October 2001:

The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of Northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause. This is a moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us...'. (Blair, 2001b)

While the US and British establishments talked a good deal about the 'war against terrorism', they found it much more difficult to fight one. The war in Afghanistan illustrated the problem. Since the 'war against terrorism' was driven largely by a desire to reap domestic rewards through a show of strength, there was a lack of political and military strategy on the ground. The aims of the war were not clear, and like the Kosovo war, appeared to shift with every new media deadline. Initially, the aim was to capture bin Laden, then to remove the Taliban regime, but despite the fire power, the daisy-cutters and the clusterbombs there was little sense of achievement.

It soon appeared that 9/11 had not established a new paradigm for the projection of power. There was no problem in bringing US firepower to bear, but the 'war against terrorism' in Afghanistan provided little new context of meaning or purpose. The conflict was shaped by the doctrine of humanitarian intervention, with the dropping of food parcels along with missiles and an emphasis on the humanitarian and human rights cause. Again, the critics argued that a humanitarian war could not be fought from 35,000 feet and the sight of the most powerful military power on earth carpet bombing one of the poorest did little to reassert a sense of moral mission.

The biggest problem was that the war in Afghanistan was not framed in a context that linked it with any positive vision of the future. The 'war against terrorism', like 'humanitarian intervention', was a policing operation, not the beginning of a revived sense of purpose. The artificial nature of the project and the lack of commitment it could inspire meant that rather than asserting its power, the US risked further being discredited. The use of local Afghan warlords to hunt down bin Laden in the mountains of Tora Bora, widely blamed for allowing him to escape, was a humiliating failure for the US. The lack of willingness to commit US troops in a situation where casualties were feared possible undermined the projection of US power and US success in imposing 'regime change'.

In the aftermath of Tora Bora, the US government was even keener to shift the emphasis to Iraq and 'wipe the slate clean'. There has been little focus on post-war Afghanistan and the Western-sponsored Karzai government has been hamstrung by the US lack of willingness to enforce his rule outside of the



capital Kabul. Policy reports contrast the 'light footprint' of international control in the state in comparison to the resources put into the more high-profile protectorates of Bosnia and Kosovo (see for example, Chesterman, 2002). The victory/defeat for the US in Afghanistan appears emblematic of the failure of the 'war against terrorism'. Every attempt to use the international sphere to regain a sense of domestic mission seemed only to make the problems worse. In this sense, it would appear that whatever happens over Iraq, the US government is unlikely to reap any long-term political gain.

It appears that the American establishment cannot even convince itself of a sense of Manifest Destiny, let alone the rest of the world. As London *Times* columnist Mick Hume asserts 'the fall-out from the Culture Wars is not only felt on campuses and in high cultural circles. The calling into question of America's traditional values has a corrosive effect on every institution including the US military (Hume, 2002). Rick Perlstein notes that the opposition to the war is not coming mainly from the public but the establishment itself:

...the foreign policy establishment seems distinctly uneasy about war in Iraq. The military establishment is not necessarily any more enthusiastic; Gen. Anthony Zinni, President Bush's own sometime Mideast envoy, has spoken repeatedly against invasion and in favour of containment. The Central Intelligence Agency has let its coolness to the invasion idea become known. (Perlstein, 2002)

The messy war in Afghanistan and the divisions within the US establishment over Iraq illustrate the difficulties of policy-making in the absence of a political or ideological framework. In relation to the 'war against terrorism', this was highlighted again by the shifting responses of Washington to North Korea. In January 2002, in his State of the Union address President Bush named North Korea as part of the 'axis of evil' and a 'threat to world peace' alongside Iran and Iraq (Bush, 2002). The US cut fuel aid that had been promised to ease the North's energy needs and, in response, North Korea defended its right to restart its nuclear weapons programme, making the focus on Iraq as the main danger of supplying weapons of mass destruction appear increasingly irrational. Washington could not sustain its hard line and in January 2003 was forced to publicly back down, offering food and energy aid to North Korea as an incentive to dismantle its nuclear weapons programme (Goldenberg and Watts, 2003).

Far from providing a sense of purpose, lacking in the domestic sphere, the 'war against terrorism' has heightened the domestic sense of uncertainty. With US and British society regularly disrupted by panics over potential terrorist releases of anthrax, botchulism, ricin, smallpox and other potential deadly



toxins, governments increasingly appear unable to assert authority. It is striking to see the much lower horizons of political leaders. Compare, for example, Blair's aspiration to seize the opportunity to 'reorder the world' with his defensive justification for war on Iraq, voiced at the Prime Minister's questions in January 2003 that 'the threat is real, and if we don't deal with it, our weakness will haunt future generations' (White and Borger, 2003). The 'war against terrorism' had become more of a holding operation than a noble mission.

The inability to establish a political project which can cohere society at home has meant that the projection of power abroad can no longer be cast within a framework of national interest with states setting a clear agenda. It seems that the 'war against terrorism' has cast marginal fundamentalist terror groups in the role of agenda-setters in the same way as 'humanitarian intervention' has given an exaggerated importance to 'principled issue' NGOs. While it may appear that nation states are losing their capacity to assert their national interests and that non-state actors are in the driving seat, this article suggests that the level of appearances may well confuse cause with effect.

Conclusion

The 'war against terrorism' clearly highlights the problems of articulating a national interest in international or domestic politics, even for the most powerful state in the world. The projection of power internationally by the United States and its allies appears to have no more connection to 'narrowly defined' national interests than the domestic exercise of power by leading Western governments. At the empirical level, it would seem that the advocates of 'postmodern' values and a new liberal internationalism have a valid point which critics of Great Power interests behind international intervention would be churlish to ignore.

This article has suggested, however, that the explanation for this shift away from the articulation of national interests cannot be found in the international sphere. Constructivist and liberal commentators argue that nation-states can no longer pursue national interests because of the pressures of international civil society, which has forced morality and cosmopolitan ethics on to the agenda. However, rather than focusing analysis from the 'outside/in', explaining Western government policy-making as a response to new international pressures from non-state actors, it seems highly likely that the projection of national interests in the international sphere has been undermined by domestic rather than international change.

If international intervention is in part driven by attempts to address the domestic political malaise, or Culture Wars in the US, it would seem that it is



important to analyse the international from the 'inside/out'. Rather than international intervention illustrating a shift away from national interest, it is suggested here that the opposite relationship is in play. The international sphere has become the testing ground through which new attempts have been made to recreate a sense of a shared domestic political project. In this sense, the Culture Wars would appear to have played an important role in shaping the projection of national power abroad. While the liberal internationalists aspired to create a new collective national identity based on cosmopolitan citizenship, the US hawks have attempted to 'stomp on Saddam to exorcise the spectres of Vietnam and Watergate' and restore a past sense of traditional moral authority (Dowd, 2002). Whether the leaders of the Western world choose to wage war in favour of ethical relativism or against it, the search for a domestic vision through international intervention has consistently been a destabilising and destructive one.

Notes

- 1 This article concerns the shift in government emphasis and public perceptions, as Chris Brown notes, foreign policy-making has always been shaped by broader concerns than those of narrow self-interest, the framework of international law and diplomacy, for example, depend on states upholding shared international norms and values.
- 2 As Hedley Bull noted, international law and the system of the reciprocal rights of state sovereignty 'assume a situation in which no one power is preponderant in strength'; otherwise, international law and sovereign rights can be disregarded with impunity, see also Holbrook (2002).
- 3 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Available from: <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss3.html>>.
- 4 David P. Forsythe notes that: 'Analysts concluded that there was considerable American popular support for pragmatic internationalism, but not a great deal of support for moral internationalism'. See further Holsti (2000).
- 5 'PM meets President Bush for Talks', Press Conference: Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George Bush, 6 April 2002. Newsroom, 10 Downing Street. Available from: <<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page4757.asp>>.
- 6 United Nations Security Council resolution 688, S/RES/0688, 5 April 1991.
- 7 See, for example, *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, A/55/305 - S/2000/809.
- 8 Fédération Internationale de Ligues des Droits de L'Homme/ International Federation of Human Rights, *International Criminal Court (ICC): No to American Exceptionalism* (December 2002). Available from: <<http://www.iccnw.org/documents/otherissues/impunityart98/FIDHPaperUSandICC.pdf>>.
- 9 The International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty recommends rejecting the concept of 'humanitarian intervention' on the basis that success is easier to achieve if military action is legitimised for 'protection' rather than humanitarian purposes. Otherwise intervention can easily be discredited through the 'tough choices' and 'short- and long-term trade offs' which have to be made between effective military action and humanitarian assistance. See, for example, International Commission for Intervention and State Sovereignty (2001a, 61 and 2001b, 368).



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